

## Ecumenical Relations Committee – General Assembly 2019

Moderator, it is undeniable that our country, continent, and world are experiencing greater division than many of us here have known in our lifetime. Division is seen in many forms. It is economic, political, ideological, and religious; and it is dangerous. At a time of division, the call upon the church is to witness to Jesus Christ who says, “Follow me”.

The Committee on Ecumenical Relations strives, in all it does, to answer this call. We seek to enable the whole Church to witness to Christ’s way of unity and peace, and thereby participate faithfully in the mission of God.

In the church, we are called to practise what we preach. Because Christ prayed for unity and because Christ calls us to a ministry of reconciliation, we not only preach these virtues, we seek to practise them. This year’s report focuses on the practice of ecumenism.

In 2018, the General Assembly adopted a new ecumenical policy for the Church of Scotland. The Committee then undertook to develop a strategy from the Policy, and this has occupied a considerable amount of our work in the last year. If the Policy was about setting out the right intentions, the Strategy is about putting these intentions into practise. This is not the work of the Committee alone, but of the whole Church. Much is, of course already happening. Councils, committees, presbyteries and hundreds of congregations are working ecumenically in diverse, enriching and imaginative ways.

The strategy is ambitious and intended to be so. We have not limited ourselves to what we are sure is possible. In faith, we articulate a vision for the practice of ecumenism so that all may hear the call of Christ: “Follow Me”. Our goal is the faithful participation of all Christians in the mission of God, unhindered by barriers and enriched by different traditions, understandings and gifts.

Fundamental to this goal is the understanding of our calling to minister to the whole people of Scotland. The Church of Scotland is becoming increasingly aware that it cannot and should not try to fulfil this calling alone. Integral to the fulfilment of this calling is the sharing with other churches in Christian mission and service.

The Ecumenical Strategy falls into two parts, one focussed on the local and regional and the other on the national and international. Locally, each congregation knows its parish in a depth that no other part of the Church can match. What we are offering are encouragement, models of good practice, effective partnership and engagement with

presbyteries. Already the Committee is re-focussing its work and commitment to the local and regional.

The Committee is convinced that local relationships will grow and flourish if they are firmly rooted in prayer. That's why we are highlighting the possibilities for building relationships locally through uniting in prayer. Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is well established and widely appreciated. Thy Kingdom Come is an exciting and well-resourced prayer initiative which runs from Ascension to Pentecost. The Committee highly commends Thy Kingdom Come. The ecumenical Liturgy for the Reaffirmation of Baptismal Vows unites us around the sacrament of Christian initiation. Those attending Heart and Soul will have had an opportunity to experience this service, led by our immediate past Moderator, Susan Brown, by William Nolan, the Roman Catholic Bishop of Galloway, and by John Armes, the Scottish Episcopal Bishop of Edinburgh. Participants will have seen that this service is eminently suitable for use in local situations.

The Church of Scotland is a respected and trusted member of national and international ecumenical bodies and values the connection and the challenge these provide. Historically, this is where the Committee has been most active, and it is our privilege to continue to support this sphere of ecumenical engagement. But increasingly we need to ask hard questions about value and effectiveness. We are committed to raising these questions in the belief that doing so benefits not only ourselves, but also all our partners.

Hard questions have been asked in recent years of Action of Churches Together in Scotland, and I am pleased to be able to report that some answers are beginning to be found. Much work has been done to address concerns over the value and effectiveness of ACTS. It is the intention of all the member churches to transition the organisation to become a Scottish Christian Forum. It is hoped that a lighter structure, based more on participation than on membership, will allow churches and Christian organisations to take part up to the level at which they feel comfortable. By providing an attractive space in which churches across Scotland can share in Christian mission and service, it is hoped that other churches will feel able to participate.

Relationships with other churches have brought both considerable joys and some sorrows. The General Assembly will be aware that the Presbyterian Church in Ireland has decided no longer to invite our Moderator to their General Assembly, having not accepted our invitation to their Moderator for a number of years. This decision, and the manner of its taking, caused considerable pain, both to those from the Church of Scotland who were in Belfast for the most recent PCI General Assembly, and to very many within the PCI itself. We continue to invite the PCI Moderator because we believe in holding out the hand of

friendship and in the ministry of reconciliation. The Assembly should be aware that, notwithstanding the PCI's decision, there has, if anything, been an intensification of contact and co-operation on a range of interests between the Church of Scotland and the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, and the Ecumenical Relations Committee stands ready to facilitate these further.

Much joy is to be found in our ongoing work with Anglican sisters and brothers. The relationship with the Church of England, building on the Columba Declaration of 2016, is enabling the sharing of resources and expertise between our churches. Discipleship formation and mission have been at the forefront of this work. Angus Morrison has co-chaired the contact group with great distinction and has done much to further the joint work of our two churches, and we thank him warmly.

Perhaps the greatest progress has been with the Scottish Episcopal Church. Together, we are recognising much more clearly our shared calling to ministry to the whole of Scotland. Our Common Calling is exploring ways of sharing worship and ministry, and the creative use of existing and new spaces for worship and community building. Good practice like this must be grounded in good theological work and we present, for the endorsement of the General Assembly, the methodology the Our Common Calling working group has adopted. The Committee is delighted that the Scottish Episcopal Church will be considering adopting substantially the same ecumenical policy as our own at their forthcoming General Synod. This is a hugely encouraging sign of the commitment of our two churches to work together, to share in mission and service to the whole of Scotland.

Moderator, the practice of ecumenism is the practice of the Church's very life. It is endlessly varied and challenging, yet, in these fractured times, the need is imperative. When the Church lives towards unity, it faithfully participates in the mission of God who reconciles all things in Christ who said, "Follow me".

One last thing, Moderator: Ros Milne, our Senior Administrator retires at the end of this Assembly. She is too modest to come on Friday afternoon, so I have to say this now. Ros has worked with Ecumenical Relations pretty much since the inception of the Committee and has been a trusted colleague to our Ecumenical Officers and a source of support, wisdom, friendship and sound advice to a succession of conveners and committee members. She is known, respected and appreciated well beyond the Church of Scotland. Ros, the words "you will be missed" can be said very easily. I hope you know just how deeply I mean them.

Moderator, I commend the work of the Committee, and of all our partners, to the General Assembly. I present the Report and move the Deliverance.